

## The Gunnison Homes of Garrett Park



(Photo: 10938 Montrose Avenue by Vickie Baily, 2009-2010)

The houses produced by Gunnison Homes, Inc. were described by the New York Times in its 1961 obituary of the founder, Foster Gunnison, as the first commercially successful mass-produced home in the United States. Gunnison was a preeminent lighting engineer and a pioneer in the U.S. in the use of structural glass. He designed lighting for the White House, the Empire State Building, and Rockefeller Center. In 1935, Gunnison started Gunnison Homes in New Albany, Indiana in an attempt to bring together modern structural technology and mass-production techniques to produce an inexpensive, easily-transportable, but sturdy prefabricated house. The company began production in 1936 and had produced 4,500 houses by the outbreak of World War II.

The basic Gunnison home model was built of 4 x 8-foot plywood panels and could be expanded in 4-foot increments. They could be built on a slab or a basement. The walls were made of marine quality  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch plywood, insulation, and framing studs. All were joined together with an adhesive and put through a hot plate press. This "stressed skin" technique was adapted from a process used to make airplane wings. The resulting wall units were only two inches thick, but had reasonably good thermal characteristics and were touted for their strength. The house was bolted together for wind resistance. The plywood walls could be left plain or covered with other sheathing materials. Into these walls were inserted steel casement windows and wood doors. Kitchens and bathrooms featured steel cabinets. Extras like fireplaces, porches, and garages could be added. The houses could be assembled on a foundation from the manufactured components in about 4 days.

Gunnison Homes became especially popular after the war as industry strove to meet the huge demand for new homes. They could be quickly constructed, were sturdy, and affordable. U.S. Steel bought a controlling interest in the company in 1944. A Time Magazine article from

Feb. 11, 1946 speculates on the promise of pre-fab houses as a solution to the post-war housing shortage. It describes Gunnison Homes as follows: Gunnison Homes. Inc., a U.S. Steel subsidiary, expects to be the biggest U.S. producer of prefabricated houses. President Foster Gunnison plans to have his New Albany, Ind. plant (which made 4,500 houses before the war) in production by March. It will turn out a complete house every 25 minutes. A new \$1,200,000 factory will be in production by August. Retail prices: from \$3,500 to \$8,000 (including cost of erection, plumbing fixtures, electrical refrigerators).â€

Gunnison Homes were marketed by franchise dealers, and by 1950, the company offered 11 models. The name was eventually changed to U.S. Steel Houses and the company continued to manufacture homes until 1974. Each Gunnison Home was identified by a plaque containing an individual house number, the size, the model and the date the house left the factory.

The local franchise for Gunnison Homes was the Walker Homes, Inc. of Wheaton MD. A 1956 postcard to the owners of 4800 Oxford Street, identifies the company name as E.& W. Homes (for Burr Edwards and Dick Walker), 11033 Viers Mill Rd., Wheaton.

There were four Gunnison Homes built in Garrett Park, at 4800 Oxford Street, 10918 Kenilworth Avenue, 10920 Kenilworth Avenue, and 10938 Montrose Avenue.

Sources: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,854164,00.html#ixzz0gl7wFssJ>: Lowery, Patricia, Prefab-ulous: Gunnison Homes were sturdy, affordable and went up in a wink. Pittsburgh Post Gazette, March 10, 2007 (link at: [www.post-gazette.com/pg/07069/767964-30.stm](http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/07069/767964-30.stm))